

## **Writers and Historical Perspectives: Indian Imagination and the “National Question”.**

In her book, *The Twice-Born Fiction*, Meenakshi Mukherjee writes that “just as the essential predicament of the nineteenth century American novelist was a sense of isolation, the essential condition of the twentieth century Indian novelist, until recent years, was his involvement and concern – involvement with the changing national scene, concern for the destiny of the country”. In the chapter “The making of a nation”, the critic focuses her literary investigations on the Independence movement, which was, in her words, “not merely a political struggle, but an all-pervasive emotional experience for all Indians in the nineteen-twenties and thirties”. (Mukherjee 1971: 34)

Involvement, concern and emotion are the components of some of the most remarkable novels written during that historical period, in the aftermath of Independence, a crucial moment that demanded of all Indians a radically new approach to life.

However, Indian society was already undergoing a process of considerable change even before this period and, from a cultural point of view, since the second half of the nineteenth century, intellectuals, poets and writers had been influenced by the British cultural environment which had pervaded their languages and traditions, introducing “new” literary forms such as the novel.

The first novel written in English dates back to 1864, to Bankim Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife*, but not until the third or fourth decade of the twentieth century was there a serious and systematic attempt to place such writing in its proper historical context and to consider it as literature. The so-called “twice-born fiction” is the expression of a contamination that has melded languages and literary styles, taking cultural advantages from both worlds, British and Indian.

To the writer, poet and composer Rabindranath Tagore goes the credit of having enriched the new genre of fictional narration at the most important stage of its growth. As the critic P.S. Ravi underlines: “Tagore’s novels helped the Indians to rediscover themselves and also created a new awareness about their culture”. (Ravi 2003: 12)

One of Tagore’s most notable works, *The Home and the World*, in which the social and political sphere of the time appears to be a determining element, was written in Bengali, but it was later translated into English and published in serial form in India in 1915.

The author adapted the genre of the novel to depict the inner changes in the lives of characters in relation to time and space. *The Home and the World* reproduces the duality of ideals and emotions that characterize such a historical period, when the whole of society was gradually preparing for an epochal upheaval. Tagore is an attentive witness of a situation that was inevitably to explode and tries to cope with his own doubts and perplexities, reflecting them in the emotions and feelings of the three main characters.

We are not yet in the decisive decades of the Gandhian movement and the politics of Nehru, but the writing already presents the same involvement and concern that are to be found in several works of the following years. The arbitrary division of Bengal in 1905, under the British tactic of “divide and rule”, had contributed to the birth of a protest movement that was familiar to Tagore. He was an active participant in *swadeshi*, the boycotting of British goods for the promotion of indigenous industry, he composed patriotic songs that are still sung today, but he was horrified by the violent riots that were breaking out in Bengal. This led him to feel there was something wrong with the movement. He perceived it as an élitist protest, run by educated and landowning classes, with very little consideration for the peasants. This is the complicated issue he tries to investigate in his “novel of ideas”.

In her introduction to the 1985 edition, Anita Desai explains how, despite the critiques received in the past from Western and Indian intellectuals, *The Home and the World* is “itself a participant in the political storm that had gathered over India in the first decade of the century and of which Tagore was at the vortex....His disillusionment with the cause and his reply to his critics were embodied in the novel, which illustrates the battle he had had to fight in his own mind, and the extent to which he had both won and lost.” (Desai 1985: 8-9) This battle deals with the consideration of nationalist issues and social problems that are discussed by Bimala’s husband, Nikhil, a wealthy landowner who is altruistic, benevolent, rational and Westernized in his ideas, but too idealistic and apparently not “progressive”. His temperament is the opposite of his friend Sandip’s, the revolutionary who stops at nothing to achieve his ends. Nikhil, the enlightened humanist, has to face hostility and isolation because of his opposition to violence, whereas Sandip appears nihilistic and arrogant, but also an attractive and charismatic leader. The novel is a dramatization of the tension between the two, representing, as Anita Desai points out, “the clash between the old and the new, realism and idealism, the means and the end, good and evil”. (1985:10)

Bimala, his wife and later on a political activist, represents Bengal to Tagore; she is often referred to as “Mother” by the characters, she is Durga, the mother-goddess and favourite deity of the Bengal. Her husband begs her to leave the *zenana*, the place reserved for women in the house, in order to enter the *world*, outside reality and the social life. Tagore seems very critical towards Bengali orthodoxy and superstition concerning the role of women and makes Bimala a deity for an independent India. The question of nationalism and anti-colonial movements is always referred to as “the Cause” and, in its name, Bimala lets herself being completely transported by what Sandip says and proposes.

Unfortunately, conflict comes when Sandip tries to establish his power over her: she understands that her beloved hero may represent evil, may lead her to a disastrous life, but when she acknowledges this, it is tragically too late and violence is breaking out with all its horrific and destructive power. “The home and the world” is a dichotomy concerning the difficult choice people have to make when history faces them and they cannot avoid a personal involvement in it. It also represents a Manichean aesthetic that is so frequent in nationalist writing, where we usually encounter two opposite characters or groups in conflict, and the author’s point of view emerges clearly from the actions and reflections of the novel’s protagonists.

In Tagore’s work, it becomes evident that neither home nor the world truly represent Gandhian thought and an effective attitude towards the Cause. The need of the people for unity when revolting against the colonial oppressor is constantly faced with the diversity of those deciding to form a protest movement: their personal opinions and different cultural backgrounds have to meet in a compromise. Thus, as in the novel itself, it is the compromise between Nikhil, Sandip and Bimala, a non violent yet decisive participation in the movement, which seems to be the right path towards freedom for India.

The historian Sumit Sarkar wrote of the novel that “Tagore anticipated almost every basic principle of what later became a nation-wide mass movement of non-cooperation under the dynamic leadership of Gandhi”. (1985: 9)

Enthusiasm for a political figure, who is seen as a representation of the country, is highly present in nationalist discourse and the way in which Bimala addresses herself to Sandip is a significant example:

“Do you know that I come to worship? Have I not told you that, in you, I visualize the *Shakti* of our country? The Geography of a country is not the whole truth. No one can give up his life for a map! When I see you before me, then only do I realize how lovely my country is”.(1985: 73)

This kind of rhetoric and patriotic devotion is largely explored in another novel written in 1938 by Raja Rao, *Kanthapura*, where the élitist movement is replaced by mass participation, the uprising of an entire village led by the charismatic figure of Moorthy. In this case, the author’s intent seems to show how in the nineteen thirties it is the peasants and, in particular, women, who can start anti-colonial protests, fighting against the government police and following the actions and principles of a leader inspired by Gandhian teachings. It also appears that Raja Rao wants to focus the reader’s attention particularly on the unity of the village, though sometimes this may seem not so realistic, in order to give an impressive example of how a rural village in the South of India was able to raise its voice and take part in the national movement.

Like the Mahatma, the village hero is often imprisoned, he is a jail-goer, as were many political activists of those times, but on occasion he returns to the village or escapes to the city to learn “new ideas”, whereas the peasants continue their battle in the countryside. In *Kanthapura*, people carry on the boycotting of British goods and the goddess Kenchamma protects the whole community: she is constantly evoked by the old storyteller who tells the story of the uprising. Religious and political elements are mingled together, “gods mingle with men”, as the author explains in the forward, “to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright” (Rao 1963: vii). This constitutes a strong basis that is able to sustain the collective uprising. The narrative seems a continuation of what Tagore started, it shows a further and more intense involvement of the author in the social turmoil, and an explanation of what the movement was meant to be.

The writer also uses a particular language he creates deliberately for such narration, with the intent of making it more suitable for the great moment in question.

His own original language, Kannada, a Dravidian language, seems to him too archaic and backward to tell a story that is in itself modern and complex.

However, Raja Rao refuses *standard English*, that is, the language of the colonizer, and he elaborates a form of *Indian English*, which is a mixture of English and several terms taken from the regional cultural background: the result is an artificial language the author has in mind for the representation of such an extraordinary political situation.

India was changing also in linguistic terms and the choice of using English for literature was related to the questioning of colonial power over the subcontinent.

There have been different attitudes to this issue and Raja Rao's example can be considered as one of the original literary devices writers have adopted for expressing their involvement with the social and political situation of India. As the writer underlines: "We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at a large world as part of us". (Rao 1963: vii)

"The home and the world" can also be a metaphor for the tension between the village and the metropolitan centres; Kanthapura and the big cities; India and foreign countries, unity and diversity. The choice of language, as well as that of staying or leaving the "Cause", of being involved or living apart from the social sphere, constitutes the material for literary works that have explored these relations in several interesting ways.

A well-known writer, Nayantara Sahgal, has interpreted these themes in an original manner: she could be defined, together with Tagore and Raja Rao, as being amongst those writers whom the Kenian writer Ngugi Wa Thiongo would call "workers in ideas". Sahgal's novels have treated various aspects of the political changes occurring in Indian society since the early nineteen thirties and it is impossible here to examine the whole of her work. However, it seems appropriate for the discourse about past and present, concern and emotions over a changing India, to mention her autobiography, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1966), a veritable archive of private memories linked to Indian history, narrated by an individual belonging to a privileged social position. Sahgal, the niece of Nehru and daughter of Mme Pandit, an important political figure of the Independence years, has been overwhelmed since childhood by the experience of the world; home for her has always been India in its entirety, with its complex issues and unstable situations. In the chapter "Politics and us", talking about herself and her sisters, she declares:

"With us, political awareness was a gradual and unconscious process and the most importance influence in our lives. We were born and grew up at a time when India had come under the leadership of Gandhi and was maturing nationhood under his guidance. My sister and I were among the youngest of India's children to be touched by the spark with which Gandhi illumined our country. It touched our lives in innumerable small ways and penetrated our consciousness gradually, so that as we grew, it became a living part of us" (Sahgal 1966:18).

In her autobiography, it is impressive to follow the narration of births, marriages, study and political activism in perfect parallelism with the “biography” of a nation, as Benedict Anderson would put it.

During one of India’s hardest periods before Independence, Sahgal and her sister Lekha had been sent to the United States to complete their education. At first, a choice of this kind was not easily well accepted by their mother: it was dangerous for two young girls to be alone in a faraway country, but the situation at home was no less complex, both parents had been imprisoned several times, and it would have been even worse for the children to stay. Their father, in fact, replied once to his wife:

“Would you rather they stayed in India and became more and more embittered day by day by what is going on around them? That would be a complete negation of all that we have stood for and tried to teach them” (Sahgal 1966: 174).

Study abroad, especially in Britain or in the United States, was certainly common for young members of the upper classes, but in the case of Nayantara Sahgal, hers was also a mission on the behalf of India. The confrontation of the two countries and the experience of diversity in relation to life at home helped the two girls to comprehend the vision of India outside the subcontinent. Both in college and in the cities she visited, she talked about her country, trying to make people forget the stereotypes and false beliefs concerning Indian culture that were so widespread even among educated people. She records that period in the USA as a valuable opportunity to put herself at a distance from the world she belonged, in order to look at it in an unusual perspective and prepare herself for her return.

The autobiography begins with her departure for America and goes back and forth across time, in a non linear reconstruction of events. This seems to reflect the disorder and continuous changes that occurred in her family following the actions of both Gandhi and Nehru. One of the first memories the author records is a reference to childhood, yet she does not recall a joyful moment, but the particular occasion that gives the title to the book:

“One day, when I was about three years old, we had chocolate cake for tea...While we were at tea, a group of policemen arrived at the house. When Lekha asked why they had come, Mummie explained that they had come to take Papu to prison, but that it was nothing to worry about, that he wanted to go...We

ate our chocolate cake, and in our infant minds prison became in some mysterious way associated with chocolate cake". (Sahgal 1966: 21-22)

Any of the autobiography's chapters, written novelistically as they are, could be an excerpt from one of the various novels the author has written, dealing not only with the problems of Independence, but also with the changing national scene of the Indira Gandhi government, the Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Sikh riots of the nineteen sixties and eighties, in novels such as *A Time to be Happy*, *Rich Like Us*, *Mistaken Identity*.

Amitav Ghosh is another chronicler of those times, though he has not been directly involved in politics like Sahgal. He has kept a distance from then, usually conveying his concern with Indian political life into the private and emotional sphere, but the historical background always defines his stories of subalterns – in the Gramscian sense - and common individuals. In his remarkable novel, *The Shadow Lines*, (1988), the author tells of a journey abroad that is needed to uncover some obscure events related to the protagonist's family past, but the autobiographical material refers inevitably to the moment that caused the traumatic evolutions of the Indian state: Partition and the killing of millions of people.

In *The Shadow Lines* past and present mingle, the narrator's memory goes across borders and frontiers, from Dhaka to Calcutta and London, in order to weave an intricate thread in which his cousin's death in the 1964 riots in Dhaka constitutes the crucial event. The story leads to a consideration of nationalism and the consequences of Partition mainly as the tragic division of communities and families like his own; we understand how difficult is for the narrator to reconstruct a unity, to rebuild a sense of community after the events that followed the dramatic summer of 1947. His family has experienced the displacement of being catapulted from one artificial country to another, with new nationalities and passports. His grandmother, born in Dhaka, had to move to Calcutta and leave her relatives; in her old age, she sadly reflects on the absurdity of what has happened to several families:

For instance, one evening when we were sitting out in the garden she wanted to know whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. When my father laughed and said, why, did she really think the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas, she was not much offended as puzzled. (...) My grandmother thought this over for a while, and then she said: But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the

same; it'll be just like it used to be before. What was it all for then – Partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between?" (Ghosh 1988: 148-149)

This phase of Indian history has generated so many stories of diaspora and displacement across decades of time. Ghosh considers this fact also from a perspective of hope for a human cosmopolitanism in which the unity of people coming from different parts of the world is and should be possible. The final encounter between the Indian protagonist and May, the English girl, is a symbolic explanation of this.

The novels of the nineteen-eighties, if only considering those by Sahgal and Amitav Ghosh, still find it imperative constantly to return to the past. Current events bring into focus events of the past, and history finds an important place for the common man as an active participant in its making.

As P.S. Ravi explains, "the writers of the eighties show that suffering did not end with the coming of freedom. The new novel with its innovativeness enables the post-Independence generation to imaginatively re-live that horrendous experience" (Ravi 2003: 41). It is, therefore, necessary to make "haunting returns" to understand the troubles related to the fall of Empire and the end of colonial power, both from a private and public perspective, in order to view the present clearsightedly, yet not without a certain pain.

This need is perceived by the sisters Anita Desai tells us about in her touching novel, *Clear Light of Day*, published in 1980. This last example seems very appropriate to conclude an only partial examination of a discourse built around history, politics and the individual, in which the questions of change and diversity have often signified immense suffering and trauma. Here the story shifts into the private again, depicting the realm of family life. What is surprisingly unquestionable is that everything, for the family, started in that summer of 1947, as Bim, the elder sister, remembers:

"There are these long still stretches – nothing happens – each day is exactly the other – plodding, uneventful – and then suddenly there is a crash – mighty deeds take place – momentous events – even if one doesn't know it at the time – and then life subsides again into the backwaters till the next push, the next flood? That summer was certainly one of them- the summer of '47". (Desai 1980: 43)

The parents, always distant from the children's lives, had died unexpectedly, at a short distance of time from each other; the elder brother had fallen seriously ill for months at a time and Tara, the youngest sister, had got married and left home forever.

All possible changes within a family occurred in that period, when India was moving towards a new phase of its life. Bim has witnessed everything: alone, in her decaying house, she now recalls every single piece of that dismembered community.

If we go back to the metaphor of “the home and the world”, it is interesting to note how Anita Desai presents the different attitudes her characters have assumed towards the family cause, which could be seen as a microcosm of the national scene. Tara and Raja, who have left Delhi to start their respective married lives, have both chosen tradition, the continuation of social practices unchanged in Indian life, whereas Bim, though facing risks and difficulties, has chosen her emancipation, she has become a teacher and has remained in the house, trying to preserve collective memories, without dispersing what was worth recording. She has tried to maintain with incredible efforts a frail unity in which nobody has ever believed, but which in any case seems so vital for everyone’s existence.

In the novel we feel again a tension between old and new, idealism and realism, means and goals. That year, 1947, marked a definitive division of the family members, but even after several decades, Tara wants to go back to that summer, to confront her sister, to ask questions, to understand better what has happened.

Anita Desai uses an intimate way of writing made up of silences, light and dark: the obscurity and immobility of family life are the counterpart of what is going on outside it. The author’s prose is another artistic example of the combination of the political with individual changing emotions. Politics is always present in people’s lives both in novels and in reality. This is one of the most evident conditions of independent India. This is why I should like to conclude quoting Sunil Khilnani, the author of an illuminating book, *The Idea of India*: “Politics at once divides the country and constitutes it as a single, shared, crowded space, proliferating voices and claims and forcing negotiation and accommodation. It is through politics that Indians are entering the contemporary world” (Khilnani 1997: 9).

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